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Book Review: Maggie Nelson, *The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2012. 304 pp.

Aaron Muldoon

University of Edinburgh

One might initially summarise *The Art of Cruelty* as a vast and wide-ranging exploration of the relationship between modernist art and ethics – and rightly so. For to seek a more precise synopsis, or to ask what specific point Maggie Nelson makes in *The Art of Cruelty* would be to miss the book's 'point' altogether. Its assumed purpose is to provide food for thought; and what a feast it turns out to be. Nelson's analysis is not concerned with modernist art *per se* but rather the *legacy* of the early 20th century avant-garde. Her questioning of this legacy is framed against a backdrop of the ethical debates surrounding the notion of cruelty in art. What may initially seem like a mammoth undertaking, the author accomplishes with flair and sophistication.

Nelson seems to recognise that it would be fruitless to come to hard conclusions about these bodies of art and critical thought given that they transgress artistic genres and the boundaries between academic fields, respectively. Instead, unresolved dichotomies, contradictions, and disjunctions characterise the conceptual territory wherein Nelson operates. One of the most prevalent of these dichotomies is the one drawn between two different perceptions of artists who attempt to represent or depict cruelty: "fearless renegades" on the one hand and "narcissistic exploiters" (141) on the other. Nelson deploys the photography of Diane Arbus and the poetry of Sylvia Plath (the art of both of whom may be seen to walk the tightrope between the above descriptors) to instantiate this contrast. Her project, then, is one of justifying the existence of paradoxes – and promoting acceptance of them – rather than one of attempting to resolve them.

Some chapters, like chapter six, "They're Only Dolls," are structured around concrete and easily framed questions. Following earlier discussions of Antonin Artaud's notion of the 'theatre of cruelty' (that which houses a radical and unfamiliar form of cruelty in order to "take audiences outside of themselves"), Nelson addresses directly and succinctly the questions of whether and how cruelty in art differs from cruelty in life. However, no conclusion is reached: "to whom, exactly, a play like McDonagh's *The Pillowman* might be cruel, and what the nature of that cruelty is, I

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cannot say” (95). Throughout the book, she goes on to investigate whether there are certain aspects of instances of cruelty in art that are still “wild and worthwhile, now that we inhabit a political and entertainment landscape increasingly glutted with images – and actualities – of torture, sadism, and endless warfare” (6).

In contrast to chapter six, other chapters house meandering, abstract, and erratic explorations of concepts. Chapter eleven, “A Situation of Meat,” for instance, consists of an investigation into the cultural intersection of raw meat, Francis Bacon’s paintings, and sacrificial rituals. The discussion might be seen to amount to the question of whether violence and gore can still make a visual impact in an already bludgeoning media environment. However, the question is again left unanswered. The twelfth chapter, “Precariousness,” is also loosely structured, this time around vague linkages between the multiple ways in which Nelson notices precariousness arising in art, film and literature. One instance of such precariousness is the position that Isabel Archer finds herself in in Henry James’ *The Portrait of a Lady* – a position in which she is neither a free agent nor an entirely powerless tool of her sexist society. Nelson also cites the precariousness of the purportedly oxymoronic notion of “male vulnerability” (197) in Lars von Trier’s film *Breaking the Waves*. Only much later do we see how all these notions of precariousness, of hanging in the balance – of *suspension* – connect back to cruelty. Even then, the connection is thin. Nelson cites the case of the black artist William Pope.L’s notably *un*-precarious performance works. One worth noting is *The Hole Inside the Space Inside Yves Klein’s Asshole* in which the artist “smeared his ass in K-Y jelly and acrylic paint, then made ‘ass prints’ on a piece of Kwanzaa paper” (203). Nelson believes this piece exemplifies how precariousness is the condition which unites us all, and mastering one’s control of it – via how it is perceived in us – can lead to the perfectly appropriate level of both depicting and observing cruelty in art.

One of the more prominent themes of the book, the one that may well lie at its core, is the relationship between truth and fact in art. This discussion focuses on the question of whether violence in art gets us closer to the ‘truth’ of human nature or – to use Francis Bacon’s terminology – what the relationship is between brutality and honesty. Nelson opens chapter nine, “The Brutality of Fact,” with the Bacon words: “Perhaps, if a thing comes across directly, people feel that it is horrific [...] people tend to be offended by facts, or what used to be called truth” (131). Nelson opposes Bacon’s

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infamously negative view of the human condition with a relatively more sanguine outlook. Her scepticism about artists having the ability to rip off the veil and show us “what the world really looks like” (143) is potentially the most significant message that she imparts within the pages of *The Art of Cruelty*. She notes, and rightly so, “that the obsessive contemplation of our inhumanities can end up convincing us of the inevitability of our badness” (7). The works of artists such as Francis Bacon, it is claimed, remain products of his notoriously particular view of the world.

Out of all of the themes that weave their way through the text, by far the most compelling is the analysis of Francis Bacon’s work. Bacon is mentioned in almost every chapter. Scraps of Nelson’s polarised intellectual relationship with Bacon’s work are scattered like a trail of crumbs through the whole book, her reactions oscillating between obsession and disgust. As she cites with disgust Bacon’s use of photographs from the Algerian Revolution featuring soldiers’ mutilated body parts, it *sounds* like her final judgement of him is one of condemnation. Yet it remains somewhat unclear whether Nelson really has come to a hard conclusion about his work or whether this judgement simply captures her sentiments about the paintings at the point where the book happens to reach its own terminus. Interestingly, despite her frequent referencing of Bacon, the author does not undertake very many close readings of his actual paintings. The text is punctuated with surface level analyses of his works, but it is more often his *words* – cited from interviews or memoirs – that fuel the steam engine of her thought. This is indicative of the curious nature of Nelson’s project; one that is grounded and founded in artworks, but is nevertheless focused on how we live with and respond to art, the legacies of artworks, and their relationships with ethical quandaries.

The Art of Cruelty exemplifies Maggie Nelson’s mastery of intertextual and interdisciplinary criticism. Nelson is an explorer, a clarifier, an *untangler* of often tricky and slippery cultural concepts. Giving voice to both sides of every debate, Nelson impresses upon the reader the fact that the schizoid nature of public discourse is not only normal and widespread, but acceptable and often desirable. Open-mindedness – so easily misconstrued as indecisiveness – is the most favourable position to take up against the current backdrop of partisanship and ever-deepening ravines in academic as well as mainstream media discourse.

Author Biography

Aaron Muldoon is an MSc student at the University of Edinburgh, where he studies Modern and Contemporary Art: History, Curation and Criticism. He graduated from the University of St Andrews with an MA (Hons) in Economics and Philosophy. His two undergraduate dissertations in Economics and Philosophy focused on the role of the critic in the market for contemporary art and the possibility of art without aesthetic value, respectively.